

'Conservocialist Transport' A Labour M.P. Takes Us To Task

To the Editor of Land & Liberty.

From Charles A. Howell, M.P.

Sir,—In your February issue, you described the nationalised transport system as "A tax-eating white elephant bequeathed by the Labour Party".

This is both untrue and dishonest as you well know, and as anyone who studies the annual reports of the British Transport Commission will learn. The B.T.C. were making a profit until the present Tory Government vented their spleen on them, and were warned, by the B.T.C. themselves, what the consequences of their policy would be. Like the so-called gypsy's warning, those of Sir Brian Robertson came true, so it is misleading to blame him or the Labour Party for the present situation.

Whilst I disagree with your published views that the whole system should be broken up into units and sold, a suggestion no Government spokesman has had the courage to expound despite their anti-nationalisation, you have at least had the courage to express the view.

You paint a very rosy picture of the service in private hands, a picture which intrigues me considerably as a railwayman with 40 years service, but as I recollect the position, the railways could not raise any capital prior to nationalisation, so what has changed the situation so much that you seem so sure the money would be so forthcoming now. Is nationalisation responsible for that?

Yours faithfully,

CHARLES A. HOWELL.

A private letter from the editor rejecting the charge of dishonesty provoked a further letter from Mr. Howell which is given in full with our comment.

I note you are prepared to publish my letter to you. I hope you will publish your own reply too—it is most revealing. It is a perfect example of evasion of the main issue.

The facts speak for themselves, and could be heard and understood by anyone who is without bias. Of course, the railways were nationalised by the Labour Government—they had to be, and one can quote Sir Winston Churchill in support—and Private Enterprise had failed, and could not possibly have faced the future as it was then. If they are broken up into units and sold, as you suggest, what would happen to those units the "investor" thought unprofitable? Would they be left with the taxpayer the same as quite a lot of road haulage was? I shudder to think of the consequences of your proposals to people living on branch lines or even in the North of Scotland.

I agree that your use of the words "White Elephant" and "bequeathed" are fair comment but NOT "Tax Eating White Elephant" because, as I stated, the B.T.C. were making a profit when "bequeathed" which is the point you evaded in your reply. I suggest you read the Annual Report in which Sir Brian Robertson warned the Government what the consequences of the policy outlined in their White Paper would be if it was implemented, and his predictions came true: financial and administrative chaos. Neither the B.T.C. nor the Labour Government can be blamed for the present chaotic position; this is entirely due to the deliberate policy of a Tory Government.

A Tory Party who spent thousands of pounds in an anti-nationalisation campaign, were hardly likely to lend their best efforts to make the B.T.C.—a nationalised industry—a success. This would be defeating their costly efforts in the opposite direction so, the cost of proving their theory correct, will cost the ratepayers, as you quote, £500 million.

Your theory that people would venture their capital voluntarily—in the railways—intrigues me considerably. They did not do so when the railways were privately owned, and I cannot see anyone investing their money at the rates they would have to anticipate from railway stock today, with such returns as are commonplace in today's so-called Affluent Society. Some parts of the railways might be able to pay a good dividend, but I cannot see them competing successfully in the free money market.

I think the railways are an essential necessity, and deplore seeing them a pawn in the game of politics. I want to see our railways giving an efficient service—for as many as possible, and not just to those situated on or near a main line—at an economic charge. Railwaymen have given unstinted service to the community in peace and in war, often whilst underpaid, and I am proud to have been one of their elected representatives. The state of the railways today is no fault of theirs — or the B.T.C.

Our Reply

Answering Mr. Howell's many points we wish first to emphasise that neither overtly nor covertly did we blame Sir Brian Robertson, or the British Transport Commission for the present state of affairs. We simply mentioned as a fact that the state-owned railways are operating at a loss which is met by taxpayers, and that this cannot be allowed to continue. This was neither untrue nor dishonest nor were we "courageous" in suggesting that the

Government should sell the railways. Whom have we to fear? We have no advertising revenue, subsidy, special privilege or votes, to consider and so are free to speak frankly on matters of public interest which fall within our compass and to let the chips fall where they may. So far as possible we endeavour always to blame measures, not men.

In the article Mr. Howell criticises it was made clear that the ideal solution, in our view, would be for the rail bed and related fixed capital equipment to remain in state ownership and for competing private firms, paying a rent, to operate services. Desirably the cost of maintaining and augmenting the state-owned basic capital equipment should be met out of a charge on land values. The next best course would be to restore the railways to private enterprise by selling them in units at auction. It is difficult to believe that there are sections which are so useless that even the scrap merchants would not bid a few pounds for the rails, etc., but if such were the case they would have to remain *in situ*, to be removed by whoever subsequently bought the land. Taxpayers do not want them. It is worth reflecting that if they were useless before nationalisation, the Labour Government spent tax monies on pigs in a poke. If they have become useless *since* vesting day, this affords some comment on nationalisation in practice.

As demand would be weak, branch lines which at present are uneconomic would be sold "for a song." On such terms there are not lacking people who in many places would be willing to sink their money into one or two diesel cars and to offer a service. If it failed, that would be their affair. Private bus companies would similarly provide transport to outlying areas. Fares might be higher than in urban areas but offsetting this is the fact that land is cheaper to buy or rent there.

The logical extension of the idea that railways are a service which everyone must enjoy wherever he lives is not merely that no lines should ever be closed, however uneconomic, but that lines should be laid, irrespective of cost, to every remote hamlet and hillside just as electricity is being taken to the most inaccessible farms.

If the railways were privately owned, they would be run at a profit. If they were profitable they would experience no greater difficulty in raising capital than do other profitable private industries. If, however, they could not be run at a profit that would mean that millions of people had chosen not to travel by rail. Why should such people be compelled as they are at present, to support the railways?

Our proposals are designed to achieve what Mr. Howell desires, namely, a railway system giving an efficient service *at an economic charge* which is not a pawn in the game of politics. Since he ascribes their present "chaotic position" to deliberate Conservative policy and must recognise that in the nature of things the present is unlikely to be the last Conservative administration to hold office during this century, Mr. Howell ought to welcome our

constructive plan for removing the railways from the arena of party politics.

COMMON MARKET AND FREE TRADE

To the Editor of *Land and Liberty*.

Sir,—The article "The Common Market and Free Trade" (L. & L. Jan.) is disappointing to say the least of it.

In the points he makes against both the Common Market and the (so-called) European Free Trade Area, Mr. Lyndon Jones makes it clear that these multilateral arrangements are not only conspiracies against the rest of the world, but against their own peoples to boot. One wonders therefore why he does not unhesitatingly condemn them as such. Neither is likely to serve the Free Trade cause in any other office but to bring it into disrepute. This is the case by virtue of the fact that as "Free Trade Areas" were conceived by protectionist British Governments there are now large numbers of people who fondly imagine that it is possible to have Free Trade whilst retaining a tariff structure. Reference to the nearest dictionary will show any enquiring person that this is not the case. Unfortunately very few people bother to enquire, either in that direction or any other. It is a constant source of annoyance that Free Traders allow this hypocrisy to proceed unproved.

In concluding that a return to Free Trade is imperative Mr. Jones states that whether this can come through a multilateral approach or whether it means going it alone is of secondary importance. In the name of the prophet *nuts!*

A multilateral approach "such as working through the G.A.T.T." can achieve absolutely nothing. In the first place a protectionist British Government is unlikely to do anything of the sort. In the second place, even if it did it would be conferring with other protectionist governments which would be akin to a conclave of Archangels deciding whether to admit the Devil to heaven.

The answer is obvious. Firstly to secure a Free Trading British Government. Secondly to go it alone. It is to this task that Free Traders should address themselves.

Yours faithfully,

JOHN C. COOK.

Wells, Somerset.

EDUCATION IN A FREE SOCIETY

To the Editor of *Land & Liberty*,

Sir,—Public education involves force, says Robert D. Benton (L. & L. Jan.)—force to compel attendance and force to compel one family to pay for the education of another family's children.

However, our compulsory education laws do not require that parents enrol their children in public schools. Parents may educate their children themselves or enrol them in private schools, provided only that the standards are adequate. Compulsory education laws aim to prevent the force involved in parental abuse or neglect. The existence of these laws is no indictment of public education. Public schools could continue well without